



Psychology of Dystopian Mass: A Study of Sowmya Rajendran's *The Lesson*

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Abstract— *In dystopian fiction, repressive regimes form a stringent system through which they control their subjects. The control is in the form of manipulation through propaganda, re-writing of history to suit regimes' agenda, creating artificial enemies to unite their subjects to redirect their hate away from the regimes. Also, use of mass psychology, especially the idea of one identifying oneself through many and many acting as one, is one of the primary end-goals of such regimes – a collectivist dystopia. These end-goals become reality when majority of subjects, who once dreamt of living in a utopian society, are convinced to unanimously agree to adapt to a fundamentalist or totalitarian ideology. Beginning of a dystopia is acceptance of an extremist ideology by the majority along with the rise of a didactic authority. In the light of this hypothesis, the present paper analyses, with the help of theory of Mass Psychology that it is not the power alone, but people living in fictional world are to be blamed equally for the ultimate demise of the society they live in. The paper analyses the behaviour of the society through its members in the dystopian novel 'The Lesson' by Sowmya Rajendran, published in 2015. The paper also aims at comparing behaviour of the mass in 'The Lesson' with other dystopian novels written by foreign authors namely 'WE' by Yevgeny Zamyatin, 'Brave New World' by Aldous Huxley, '1984' by George Orwell and 'Fahrenheit 451' by Ray Bradbury; and with Indian Dystopian novels – 'Leila' by Prayaag Akbar, 'Escape' and 'The Island of Lost Girls' by Manjula Padmanabhan. The study also takes into account how the already marred protagonist living in dystopia, struggles against fellow individuals and authority in order to break the chains of submission and manipulation in the novels mentioned above.*



Keywords— *Dystopia, Identification, Mass Psychology, Authority, Culture, Religion, Institutions, Justice*

I. INTRODUCTION

Individuals in a mass, are influenced by one another and by an authority – through its constant propaganda, at conscious and unconscious levels. Individuals adopt others' behaviours and actions to shape their actions and to create their own identity initially. Therefore, individuals' personal experiences and social limitations influence their decisions. This confirms the predominance of mass in their lives. When the majority of a country or region bends toward an extremist ideology, the

purpose of progress towards a just society takes a detour to race up to be a dystopia.

As history has often shown, in the beginning, the majority justifies its extremist approach and in turn offers control to a leadership. The leadership ends up making the majority its submissive subjects. Such extremism, whether political, social or religious, lowers the critical faculty of the majority. Gustave Le Bon in *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, Sigmund Freud in his *Mass Psychology and Analysis of the "I"* and Elias Canetti in *Crowds and Power*

commonly observe that the critical faculty of a mass is always lower than that of an individual in isolation. Le Bon writes, "In the collective mind the intellectual aptitudes of the individuals, and in consequences their individuality, are weakened" (Le Bon 8). Freud's words in his work are as follows – "The fact is, the perceived signs of an affective state are such as automatically to evoke the same effect in the person doing the perceiving. This automatic compulsion will be the stronger, the more people are seen to exhibit the same affect simultaneously. The individual's critical faculties will then fall silent, and he will allow himself to slip into the same affective state" (Freud 34). And Canetti confirms that while perceiving, individuals in the affective or influenced state (feeling and experiencing emotions) mirror each other. This mirroring becomes more common when more people enter the mass. In this action of automatic compulsion, an individual no longer uses her/his critical faculties; s\he repeats the same actions as majority does because the "mass impresses the individual as an untamed force and an invincible threat" (Freud 35). The dystopian government takes advantage of this factor and introduces institutions, corresponding literature and visual representations to further regulate reasoning faculties of the people, keeping them in a submissive state.

Utopian literature and dystopian literature are results of events in the past or present which have changed the regular, progressive course of future towards either a bright future in case of utopia or dark reality in case of dystopia. Present reality is stretched till a happy or a gloomy future is achieved in time. Utopian and dystopian literature can therefore be called far-fetched realities. Individuals continue to exist in that future but live with seemingly free-will in utopia or a strictly regimented and regulated life in dystopia. It can be concluded therefore that humans in reality and characters in utopian or dystopian fiction have certain common behavioural characteristics. Freud, with the help of William McDougall, observes five primary conditions mentioned below for mental life of organized crowd or mass, whether utopian or dystopian, to exist for a prolonged period:

The first fundamental condition is a measure of continuity in the existence of the mass....

The second is that a specific conception of the nature, function, attainments and aspirations of the mass should have taken shape within the individual member in such a way that, for that individual, an emotional relationship with the mass as a whole can result.

The third is that the mass should come into contact (for example, through competition)

with other, similar collective entities that nevertheless differ from it in many respects.

The fourth is that the mass should possess traditions, customs and institutions, particularly such as bear on the relationship of its members one with another.

The fifth is that, within the mass, there should exist a structure that finds expression in the specialization and differentiation of what each individual is expected to do (Freud 36).

The five conditions mentioned above apply both to utopia and dystopia, depending upon the measure of freedom given and control applied by both, the society and the authority. A mass must continue to exist as long as possible. The purpose of mass formation must also be the purpose of the individual members in it, carrying strong emotional relationship with the mass. Authority introduces other collective entities of similar type but of different political, social and religious practices for comparison and differentiation. The mass must have its own set of traditions, institutions and culture to separate it from others as much as possible and to keep the bond between the members within stronger. Each individual in the mass must know where s\he belongs and how s\he can contribute to the mass s\he lives in. A didactic authority thus controls a submissive mass using these very characteristics. The subjects too do not try to rise above the collective identity in exchange of acceptance by the mass. Individuals submit themselves to the reigning common ideology. Fear of rejection and punishment stops them from rebelling. Group of such individuals forming a society can therefore be called dystopian mass.

Examples of such submissions are evident in characters of dystopian fictions under consideration. In *WE*, when I-330, attraction of the protagonist D-503, tells him to get a fake medical certificate to be with her, D-503 feels that "This was certification of that we were sick, that we were not able to appear at the workplace. I had stolen my work from the One State, I am a thief, I would soon be under the Machine of the Benefactor..." (Zamyatin, 65) as he was lying to the authority and therefore would be punished if caught; in *Brave New World*, when the protagonist Bernard Marx shares his thoughts on how he dislikes being part of the social body and wants to spend time with Lenina alone, Lenina finds these ideas disgusting and asks Bernard "...how can you talk like that about not wanting to be a part of the social body?" (Huxley, 78); In *1984*, Winston Smith, the protagonist, acts in the session of the Two Minute Hate Speech as others do in order to avoid attention of the Thought Police – officials who look for socially deviated individuals even in their thoughts; in *Fahrenheit 451*,

possession of books and literature is illegal, that's why Guy Montag, the protagonist, is even afraid of his own wife as he hides the books that he has collected from the places he has burnt down as a fire-fighter; Dr Iyer, the official responsible for the reconditioning of the women who are detained because of inter-caste and inter-religious marriages in correction centres in *Leila*, considers that Shalini and Rizwan, as both were in inter-religious marriage which is against the law, are unsuitable parents because of the life-style they had chosen and therefore Shalini must be purified; the brothers of Meiji in *Escape* are afraid of her getting discovered by the General and his boys, as no women are allowed to live in the country after the Change when women were killed and burnt alive by their own family or the crowd; and the people in *The Lesson* think that the Second Daughter getting raped live on TV is absolute justice, because she has lied about her pregnancy to avoid rape by the Rapist. These incidents therefore confirm submission of an individual to the prevailing mass psychology.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF DYSTOPIAN MASS

Dystopian mass has, as do people of a nation or state in reality, a common goal. Dystopian majority uses fear and rejection as an instrument of control and social bonding. Individual opinion succumbs to tyranny of opinion of the majority and therefore loses critical faculty. Reaction of dystopian mass is always extremist in nature. Despotic government and dystopian mass use guilt to subdue an individual. Dystopian mass gains power through submission of individual members. Every individual is secure if s/he ardently follows the law of the land. Breaking of social norms, coinciding with laws of the land, result in rejection of an individual by the mass. Mass needs a leader and a leadership to revere and to fear because leaders portray mass' emotional strength. Through propaganda, fear converts into respect for totalitarian ideology. Dystopian mass exchanges autonomy for security and becomes submissive to reigning authority. It persistently propagates equality with importance of hierarchy as necessity and the individual thus pays the price of being a part of the power by sacrificing freedom of thought and intellectuality. Extreme despair arising out of the difficulties of the present, drives mass to attain a just and humane society yet through above mentioned steps, ends up being dystopian mass in that desperate attempt. Here the intent changes to gain power in society and/or favour of the authority rather than each individual's self-development and collective development of the society s/he lives in. Dystopian mass therefore, who begins with the goal to move

to liberation, ends up being submissive instead as social anxiety, fear of public opinion and authoritative persecution in individual members supplant thirst for obedience.

The Lesson has many such individuals. The chaos in the novel begins when the protagonist, the Second Daughter, rebels against the institution of marriage by asking for divorce from her violent husband – the Dentist. She asks for justice from the Adjustment Bureau but instead she is asked to go by the Conduct Book – a book that has guidelines for women on how to adjust after marriage. The Rapist, a government employee, has been assigned to rape her so that she becomes unacceptable by other men in the city. In order to escape the punishment, she lies of her pregnancy. But her lie leads her to an exemplum in the entire city after it is discovered that she has lied to the authority and her in-laws. The President of the Adjustment Bureau sets for the Second Daughter a punishment on TV – getting raped live.

There is fear of and respect for the President of Adjustment Bureau and the chief of Moral Police Force. The Rapist has been given a lot of importance for the work he does – punishing women who do not accept the institution of marriage. The Moral Policeman and the media mogul are reformers of the young in the society. There is a lot of influence of media on public opinion. There is attitude of rejection towards socially deviant people like - the eunuch and the Second Daughter. There is the demand for the lesson by rape. The increase in TRP of shows which show the level at which people accept punishment as norms in order to save and propagate the institution of marriage. Violent and non-confirming behaviour of the Dentist, his mother, the eunuch's mother, the Second Daughter's mother, the First Daughter, the neighbours of the Dentist, the girl in the studio towards the Second Daughter; and the boys of the university and that of the vice chancellor of the university who impose restrictions on girls' dresses to stop their molestation. All these incidents are proofs that the mass has left no space for any logical thought in their ideological bent in order to preserve institution of marriage. Also the pride the family of the Rapist feels for his government job and that he is going to be on TV prove that everyone has no problem with radical following of institution of marriage. Above all these is the authority keeping the status quo of the institution of marriage.

Thus, the authoritative government, to maintain continuity and to keep its subjects together, introduces parallel conditioning; sites shared emotional attachments, reveals other masses to its mass to draw comparison, points out the shared culture, religion and tradition, and pre-assigned job for each individual. The government

consciously and the mass unconsciously therefore create a dystopian mass.

In the novel, the mass of characters derives its purpose from a shared idea of preserving “the Holy Institution of Marriage” (Rajendran 11). Whoever, in the novel, tries to oppose this institution, is punished by the authority and repelled by the mass. The present paper studies individuals in the novel together and analyses their characterizations as dystopian mass individuals. All, except the Second Daughter, in the novel have the common objective of preserving the institution of marriage in the capital city. The paper, implying the theory of Mass Psychology into the fictional world of the novel, tries to establish a link between the characters, who act as a dystopian mass to achieve the same end-goal – to watch the Second Daughter getting punished by the Rapist on TV for opposing the institution of marriage, the reigning ideology, by asking for divorce from her violent husband.

III. THE REIGNING IDEOLOGY OF THE MASS

Mimetism - the desire to be like others and to make others like us – becomes an essential social experience and precondition for an individual in dystopia. It is D-503 in *WE*, who in the beginning of the novel says, “You see, even in our thoughts. No one is ever ‘one’, but always ‘one of.’ We are so identical...” (Zamyatin 8). The people in *Brave New World* feel great disgust at the thought of reproduction through sex as babies are grown in test-tubes rather than being born. In 1984, people of Airstrip One revere Big Brother because an idea has been created through propaganda that he saves them from Goldstein and other enemies of the Party ideology. When Faber explains history to Montag in *Fahrenheit 451*, he says, “... Remember, the firemen are rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its own accord. You firemen provide a circus now and then at which buildings are set off and crowds gather for the pretty blaze...” (Bradbury 113). Naz, brother-in-law of Shalini, tips Repeaters in *Leila* as Naz never liked the idea of Shalini creating her own space outside his religion and community. The world of Meiji in *Escape* is deprived of women and clone Generals reign whose ideology is that women are Vermin and root of all corruption and therefore, do not deserve to live at all, and therefore during the Change, men of the country themselves burn the women alive. Hence,

In societies dominated by the ‘we-self’ (to Roland, Japan and India), self-esteem depends on the honour and reputation of the groups individuals belong to, particularly the family, usually regarded as the most important bond of all.

‘Individuals’ may also be conceived not as single persons, but as seamlessly wedded to their ancestors. They are thus several people at once. A strict hierarchy is common... When ‘I’ attempt to escape this process, it is always at the risk of increased alienation and ostracism – for no groups tolerate rejection lightly (Claeys, 35-36).

In countries like India, people are identified by their family names and by the caste or community they belong to. Every individual member of the family, in every sense, represents the entire family and her/his ancestors. Those individuals who alienate themselves from this structure and refuse to identify themselves as their families are, attract negative attention of the community and the society as no group tolerates deviation from predetermined norms. In *The Lesson*, the author has not given any names in capital city. They are introduced and named by the positions they hold in their family and in the society. These fictional individual members of the mass share the common idea of preserving the institution of marriage. To be accepted, the submission by female individuals to social structure and authority is mandatory; while the male individuals have a certain freedom, they cannot oppose the institution. The identity, therefore of each individual, is determined by the way in which s/he commits to the institution of marriage in the novel – the opposition of which would result in humiliation as happens with the Second Daughter.

In *The Lesson*, the very existence of the office of the Rapist in the government building and the way in which the Rapist identifies himself – a government employee and a public servant – represents the moral and ethical rules people have accepted as a norm. To preserve the institution of marriage, rape has been legalized. The Rapist in the novel is appointed by the government to teach lessons to women who break the laws ascribed to preserve the institution of marriage – the rules of the “Conduct Book” (Rajendran 28). And the mass considers it a reformation as it prevents marital separation and following societal collapse. The mass believes that rape would force women to adjust in marriage out of shame and fear of unacceptance from others in society. Therefore, there is no opposition when a woman is raped. The very idea of punishment by rape of the Second Daughter, live on media channel, is readily accepted by the people of the capital city. As the Rapist himself is going to rape the Second Daughter, his status in the public changes from a government employee to a celebrity; people start asking for his autograph at public places; and he is trending on the social media as well.

The Moral Policeman is another such representative of mass mentality in the novel. He is

appointed to teach lessons to the young unmarried couples in love who stroll in gardens and other public places. People of the capital city do not mind such punishments as they consider that these are for greater good of the younger generation. The Moral Policeman catches a young couple in the part and physically harasses the girl, to teach her lifelong lesson. If the couple had opposed, the Moral Policeman would have called their parents and exposed them. Such an act by the Moral Policeman suggests that mass and its individuals are concerned more about preserving collective ideology.

The Dupatta Regulator at the university is appointed to prevent molestation and rapes. The law of wearing dupatta in a particular manner is introduced and every girl is checked for the same during the morning assembly by the Dupatta Regulator. This shows the proportional relationship between the mass and mass individual, as the mass holds the idea that such law would eradicate “unauthorized molestations and rapes on campus” – only when girls are restricted to wear clothes in a prescribed manner, decided by the Dupatta Regulator (Rajendran 41).

The First Daughter, the sister of the Second Daughter in the novel, is the exemplar of a female conditioned as mass individual. “She was brought up to be a bride. She did not even address their parents as Mama and Papa because she was not going to be their daughter forever. Those titles were reserved for her in-laws” (Rajendran 20). She gives birth to “three children within the first five years, all of them sons” (Rajendran 20-21). As soon as she comes to know that her sister has lied about her pregnancy and that she is going to get raped on TV, the First Daughter cuts all her ties with her paternal family. She cannot lose her identity as a mass individual for her sister who has broken the rules of the institution of marriage.

In *The Lesson*, the President of the Adjustment Bureau is a powerful man. His depiction suggests that he can be hailed as the leader of the capital city. He is the one who comes up with idea of Second Daughter’s rape on media channel he owns. He is the one who introduces the Prison of Illusion and the Box to manipulate women who ask for divorce. His first marriage was a love-marriage with the Feminist of his college. The President, on the wedding night, forced himself upon the Feminist considering it as his “conjugal right” and not rape, since they were married (Rajendran 111). The Feminist dies and the President remarries another woman who knows how to adjust in the marriage. His parents manage to find a new wife for him. It therefore validates supremacy of the institution of marriage. Thus people, especially women, have no option but to

accept the idea of adjusting in marriages so that they are accepted by their in-laws and the society as well.

IV. CULTURE AND MASS

Humans suffer under the burden of repressive cultural imperatives that force them against their nature of acting freely by exalting their unconscious desires. An individual finds herself/himself sacrificing her/his own needs to make coexistence possible. “Culture, in other words, needs to be defended against the individual, and its arrangements, institutions and decrees all serve that end” (Freud 110). For complete acceptance of cultural ideas, ideals of culture are propagated as psychological assets. The comparison of one’s culture with other cultures also serves this end. Introduction of other cultures is only to draw comparison and consequently to give a sense of pre-eminence of one’s own culture. In *The Lesson*, the Chief of Moral Police Force considers Western culture degraded; D-503 draws comparison between the ancestors and the present world order he lives in citing that individualism is destruction of society and collectivism is evolution; Joshiji in *Leila* considers the current inter-racial marriages and the current life-style of people a form of impurity and degradation of cultural heritage of the nation; The Generals in *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls* propagate that the country has become much more peaceful and advanced as compared to the time when women used to live in the country.

The cultural construct in *The Lesson* is based to fortify supremacy of getting married and being married through constant social and authorized conditioning. Authority, male members consciously and female members unconsciously of the mass impose pseudo-idealistic institution of marriage. Imposition of such an idea is to create a sense of need for adjustment in women after marriage for them to live a happy and peaceful life. If anything goes awry, women are to be blamed anyway. The Mother insists and requests her daughter, the Second Daughter, to adjust with the Dentist despite the mental and physical torture. The mother-in-law of the Second Daughter keeps a blind eye at home when she is tortured and abused, and feels avenged for her son when she comes to know about the punishment the Second Daughter is going to receive for her lie. The mother of the Eunuch blames her daughter-in-law for being sterile and not her own son the infertile Eunuch. The President’s parents consider the Feminist a jinx and the girl they choose for the President a boon. The Media Mogul loves the idea of the show of the Second Daughter getting raped live and the First Daughter renouncing her ties with the family are the incidents in the novel that reflect the cultural conditioning in form of

adjustment and acceptance on part of women characters to maintain supremacy of institution of marriage.

V. INSTITUTION, JUSTICE AND MASS

Culture and Tradition establish a platform on which the individuals identify themselves as members of a society, a nation or a race. But to make such identification concrete, institutions are found. These institutions act as chemical bonds which keep the individuals together. The institutions maintain a sense of equality in the mass. Thus, Freud writes,

What is subsequently found to operate in society as community spirit, *esprit de corps*, etc. undeniably springs from an original envy. No one should seek to stand out; all should be and possess the same. The implied meaning of social justice is that a person denies himself much in order that others, too, shall have to deny themselves as much or (which comes to the same thing) be unable to ask for it. This demand for equality is the root of social conscience and the sense of duty (Freud 75).

In order to keep mass together for a long time, individual's envy is satisfied by fulfilling the demand of equal treatment. This means that the repression and bans are applicable on everyone. The government and the institutions serve this end. Often a powerful minority controls these institutions. These organizations also keep the mass immune to disintegration and prevent changes in its structure, so that it continues to exist – a certain external compulsion. The institutions therefore “are required to govern the relations of human beings one to another...” (Freud 110). Although everyone in the mass is prone to the risk of physical damage, such risk unites individuals who forbid one another to kill. But they collectively exercise the collective right to punish the one who violates the norms. The punished individual's actions are identified as unethical, unnatural and/or unlawful. This punishment is termed as justice.

In the novel *The Lesson*, the government building has separate offices of the Rapist, the Adjustment Bureau and the Moral Police Force. All of these have one goal, to preserve “the Holy Institution of Marriage” (Rajendran 11). The Moral Police Force takes care of a marriage notifier. If marriage notifying memos are not followed as ordered, pressure is created by anonymous phone calls. Pressure is also created through relatives asking when they would get their children, especially girls, married. The Adjustment Bureau instructs female subjects to keep the Conduct Book, read and follow it religiously in order to avoid any conflict in marriage. Severity of punishment is decided by the number of rules that are broken from the Conduct Book.

Divorce seeking women are manipulated by the government at the Adjustment Bureau, first by Prison of Illusion (PoI) – a method in which women are taken into a dark room and an illusion is created that if they refuses to adjust, how desolate they and their families' future would be, how people would treat them and reject their presence. If Prison of Illusion is not enough, there is an expensive technology of the Box in which a replica of children of women seeking divorce is generated so as to break them emotionally and inveigle them that they would get the bliss of being a mother, a wife and a respected individual in the society.

VI. CONCLUSION

An individual identifies herself/himself by absorbing others with a certain uniqueness of her/his own. A society accepts an individual only when s/he accepts its ideology by transforming herself/himself into a mass individual. Consequently, the individuality is lost and bans are disguised as laws to create sense of equality and order. Fears are soothed by providing culture and tradition. Institutions preserve culture and tradition actively. These ideas, institutions and bans solidify the continuation of existence of mass. Exposure to other cultures is to let the mass feel superiority of its own culture, so that the individuals never leave the mass. *The Lesson* is not merely a fictional world of Indian society but also a reflection of contemporary India it criticizes.

The Second Daughter, like D-503 in *We*, Winston Smith in *1984*, Guy Montag in *Fahrenheit 451*, Shalini in *Leila*, and the Youngest and Meiji in *Escape* and *The Island of the Lost Girls*, breaks the prevailing norms of the society and the laws formed by the authority in order to escape further submission. She fights for individual freedom. Against the indestructible force of the society, the Second Daughter finally accepts her fate and the supposedly chaos she is accused of creating to save her family from the demise. In the end, she lifts the mask, an unscripted act, and reveals her identity, which is again against what she is expected to do according to the script of live TV show – *The Lesson*.

As Jacqueline Rose observes, “...He (Freud) concludes, ‘that a culture that fails to satisfy so many participants, driving them to rebellion, has no chance of lasting for any length of time, nor does it deserve one’” (xi). And this rebellion begins with the Second Daughter, and later in form of a protest by her family and few others.

The mass in the dystopian society constantly demands submission of individual members in it. Government, its institutions, laws, culture, religion and tradition forbid and allow an individual's unconscious aggression, unconscious intentions and hidden identity

through mass exaltation simultaneously. Institutions and the mass form the concept of an ideal mass individual by propagating not what one wants to be, but one has to be. An individual in the mass feels enormous power of unity. The same individual also feels fear of rejection and resultant isolation by the mass. This results in the fall in intellectuality. Thus, in dystopian fiction, authority gains control over the reality of its subjects and majority actively participates in exhibiting controlled reality. This proves that the mass too plays an active role in creating the dystopia it live in.

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